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The idea of the neighborhood school is strongly entrenched in the minds of most parents in urban areas. The idea is maintained by recollections of past situations which no longer exist. Rural and private schools have consolidated, drawing pupils from wide areas of dispersed population. In a city situation there is likely to be no true neighborhood because of the density of the population and family mobility. City children tend to make friends in their local areas rather than at school. Teachers no longer live in the area in which they teach. No great feeling of local loyalty among parents usually exists and attachment to the local school neighborhood is usually low. Schools tend to form along lines of ethnic similarity among the students. Unequal educational situations result. It is held that, educationally, there is little rationale for the existence of neighborhood schools.							
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Working Paper III

A SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD

SCHOOL CONCEPT

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Task Force One: Research and Evaluation
Study of Educational Consequences of Racial Imbalance
Massachusetts State Board of Education
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Rochester, N. Y. . . .

The neighborhood school is a tenet of American educational faith, Justice William G. Easton said. While segregation (not racial imbalance) in our schools by law or in fact is to be abhorred, it is detrimental to both Negro and white children to uproot them from their communities and haul them from one school to another to force integration in an artificial and unworkable manner.

(The Miami Herald, Friday, April 3, 1964, p. 5 - B)

New York State Supreme Court Justice William G. Easton expresses a widely-held lay view of one aspect of American education. When he states that, "the neighborhood school is a tenet of American faith," he is asserting what has been a generally accepted version of the local school unit.

It is indeed true that there is significant feeling about the neighborhood school. What we need to ask in the present period is whether this feeling about the school is one based on the reality of the educational experience of children, or whether it has some of the character of a myth based on nostalgia for a bygone era. The question becomes: is there in fact a neighborhood school in most of our school districts which has significant educational meaning for children, teachers and parents?

Let us examine the background for today's local school:

The local school, serving an identifiable community, whether it be town, village or section of a city, has a long history. Traditional expectations have tended to grow up around this institutional setting. Like the country courthouse set in the shaded square, the neighborhood school has been seen as a central focus of radiating streets. Down these streets children came and went through the tides of the school day and year. The 'walking distance' school was a reality for all the generations before hard surface roads and school buses; if you could not walk the distance (or had no horse to ride) you did not get to school.

Like other institutions, the school's setting has shifted to meet new educational and social needs. Strong pressures have removed the one-teacher rural school from the landscape in most places in the United States; where such schools remain, population is just too thin, and consolidation would be over too vast an area even for a school bus. Rural areas could not support needed school services if each cross-roads had its own tiny school. Consolidation was not easy; many a school district fought against consolidation since there was a strong feeling for the old local school; but the obvious advantages for children eventually have convinced the most resistant. States, through equalization funds, have helped the consolidation process, in large part because of the knowledge that the advantages of the

larger consolidated school outweighed the traditional feeling about the small local school.

While the public schools were being established, another type of school came into being. This was the independent school, either private or parochial. Such schools drew children from all areas of a community from the very beginning. The private residential school gathered its student body from all over a state or region or even nation. Few private schools at any time have been able to draw upon a large enough local clientele to be 'walking distance' schools for very many of their students. Today the private schools in urban and suburban areas have their own fleets of buses. Interestingly enough, one notices that many of these schools, particularly in suburbia, are for very young children: nursery school through grades one or two or three. Often, these are the children of working mothers who cannot afford full time day care at home. Private schools are the answer. Many such schools provide not only an instructional day, but care from early morning until late afternoon. The children may ride as long as 45 minutes to and from such schools. For the segment of the school age population which attends such schools, or attends residential institutions, the neighborhood school is not a reality, or apparently a necessity.

For those who have always patronized private schools there never was a concept of the neighborhood as the "natural" base for the

educational unit. The meaningful reference-group which has often attracted the parents to the private school was the social position of other patrons; there were seen to be distinct advantages in having one's child attend such a school because of the contacts he would make, even if it did mean extracting him from his neighborhood play group. The selective parochial high school in metropolitan areas similarly draws students from a wide sector, and typically does not restrict attendance by parish. Again, parents send their children to such schools, often at some cost in both time, money and convenience, because of the advantage they have seen accruing from such attendance.

What happens to the child who goes to a school outside his district? In the case of the private or parochial school student, the parents involved have made a decision which means that their youngster will spend his school hours with other children from distant parts of the community, and will return to play with quite another group. If such a displacement works against the child's growth and development, it is not apparent in the decision parents make, and children accept to go to a school outside their play area. Studies are lacking to tell us how many transfers from private or parochial schools into public school were due to the insistence of children to be in the same school with their out-of-school playmates.

Another factor which has changed the picture of the local school serving a local community is the fact that a city neighborhood, particularly in a major center, can hardly be thought of as a neighborhood in the small town or suburban tract sense. The neighborhood for a dweller in a high density area might be his apartment house. Some high-rise apartments may have as many residents as a small town. With high population density has come high transiency. Urban renewal often has removed local landmarks which once helped to establish the feel of a neighborhood. But increasingly, greater concentrations of people have resulted in greater movement of people. The transiency itself may be due to a feeling of rootlessness, or the rootlessness may produce the transiency, but observers have noted that slum families move often. They do not move far away, maybe only a few blocks, but they move.

Administrators of public education in big cities typically insist that a child relocate in a new school if he moves into a new district; and in a big city this may mean that a move of only four blocks is into a new school district. Yet the same administrators complain about the problem of transiency because it interferes with the educational progress of a child. Administrators do not see how to keep a child in one school, though outside his district, even if by so doing he might be helped academically. (Matrin Mayer, "A Perspective" in Schreibner, Daniel (ed) The School Dropout, Washington, D.C. 1964 p.209)

In the case of the slum child whose family moves often, there is clear lack of educational utility in the strict application of the neighborhood school concept. When district lines are rigidly held to, a child may be actually hurt by the need to go to the neighborhood school if he is the child of a highly mobile family. If district lines are not rigid, as is true of Baltimore, and a child may stay in the school in which he originally registered, few actually do so. This may be because the school system sees no particular need to help the child and his parents see the value of educational continuity; one suspects that the neighborhood school thinking is too powerful to provide a clear vision of this particular educational problem.

Let us examine the educational experience of the urban or suburban child in a single dwelling area going to a neighborhood elementary school. With the exception of some large suburban developments, any given child may find, within a block, one or two children who are, in fact, in the same grade that he is in. He may find, if fortunate, one child who is actually in the same room. Rarely will the proportion of same grade and same classroom be higher. On his way to school he may pick up one or two more peers - same grade, sometimes same room. Typically then his educational day is experienced with children who are from a different part of the school community, and again typically from a part of the area too far away to be out-of-school playmates.

There are certainly many individuals who can today recall the friends with whom they started first grade and who stood beside them on graduation from high school. This is the vision of a stable American community which pervades many of our pictures of what ought to be. The real difficulty in assessing today's community and today's school is that the memory of the stable neighborhood does not correspond to the facts. There are few communities today in which one could predict, with any degree of confidence, that a child who entered first grade would graduate from high school with any of those who entered school when he did from the same neighborhood.

Few suburban children wander farther across the street or down one block. Unlike the rural community, urban and suburban neighborhoods have too many factual dangers - cars, high speed roads, delivery trucks, shopping centers - that children are rarely encouraged and often in fact forbidden to go far for playmates.

The net effect is, of course, that children play with those who are available. Even if children could go farther afield, it is likely that the play group would not be circumscribed by rigid age or grade. Children play up and down the age grid. At times a child seeks younger ones to boss, or protect, or teach, or tease. Other times he tags along after the bigger boys hoping to get asked to join the game. He may play with the girls one day and scorn them the next. In other words, the neighborhood play group is not the same as the play group of the school.

Increasingly, as schools are using recess periods and lunch periods for organized games and calisthenics, the child lacks even these free periods to seek out his neighborhood playmates on the playground, even if he could find them. In many schools, too, different age groups eat lunch and are out for recess at different times. Thus even if he wanted to, the procedure of the school will often interfere with his having access to very many of his neighborhood playmates during school hours. Thus the child's view of the school is not that of a neighborhood transplanted.

The prize recollection of the neighborhood school included the 'live-in' teacher. The teacher boarded with the local parents, lived in a 'teacherage' near the school, or lived down the block from the school building. Today it is only by remote coincidence that a teacher lives within the same neighborhood where she teaches. This is heavily true of teachers in slum schools and is probably true for about 80% of other teachers. Like other people, teachers live where they feel comfortable and where they can find the housing that pleases them and which they can afford; this does not typically coincide with the school area in which they teach. And, if they once taught in the same neighborhood, it is highly probable that they may have transferred to another school in the same district. The teacher can make a choice of schools within a system. As principals change, as new schools open up, the teacher may become

disenchanted with the local school - and vice versa, and request a move to another building. It is a rarity to run into one's local teachers in a local store. In fact, many deliberately decline to live in the local area so that they can have a sense of greater personal freedom. In fact, today's teacher is often encouraged to live outside the school district in which she teaches by the very persons who employ her. It has been recognized that the teacher becomes very 'visible' when living in the area in which she teaches. This is an uncomfortable feeling for many individuals, who prefer the privacy of being in a distant neighborhood to being watched and noticed by several hundred pairs of little eyes. The local teacher as a prop for the neighborhood school is not often found.

Parental identification with the local school has been a subject of much conjecture. Do parents feel a sense of local concern and local pride in their "own" school? Many parents in many school districts are active and interested patrons. Many are not. Families in urban and suburban areas are mobile. The transiency rates may not be as high as in some slum areas, but in some suburban areas they are quite extreme. But even with more stable community areas, the typical pattern of living cuts horizontally through the social fabric. Doctors meet socially with other doctors or professional people; not with the salesman across the street or the bank teller two doors down. The salesman, too, may find his social network through a Toastmaster's Club

or old college friends. In other words, the adults of the community are only partially imbedded in the neighborhood as such; much of their significant work and social life takes place outside of this area. For this reason, plus the mobility of families, the neighborhood school is often at a loss to enlist enduring and extensive school support.

We must not forget, too, that with a three level school system - elementary, junior high and senior high - a parent may be part of two or three 'school neighborhoods', of ever widening geographic boundaries.

What then is the utility of the neighborhood school concept? We have seen that it no longer has the clientele of previous generations who lived within walking distance of the school, and were stable in residence through at least 12 years of schooling. Perhaps nothing has eroded the neighborhood concept more than that of population mobility. It is not just the school that has been affected, but other local institutions. Churches today enroll parishioners from a wide geographic area; the automobile has made this possible. The local grocery store which gave credit and delivered one's order is a rarity these days; it has been replaced by the chain store with its impersonal cash procedures.

Why then do we feel that the neighborhood school, of all such local institutions, is worthy of particular attention? The answer

appears to be in the nature of the neighborhoods of today's cities. Geographic areas are distinguishable according to the group that lives there. Such areas may not be neighborhoods in any of the traditional sense of the word; there is usually no great feeling of local loyalty, and there is a diminished attachment to the local school. The distinguishing feature of the "neighborhood" is ethnic similarity. Thus the argument for the neighborhood school can only rest, from a sociological point of view, on a conviction regarding ethnic similarity or solidarity. The assumption here is that persons of like ethnic backgrounds ought to - or prefer to - send their children to schools where there are mostly others of the same group. This is certainly true when the group is Anglo-Saxon white. It is not true when the group is from other ethnic derivations. The member of a non-Anglo-Saxon ethnic group is typically aware of the differences between himself and the white Anglo-Saxon group which appears to control community policies. While the individual may have few illusions about his own chance to change his economic and social position, he, like Americans for two hundred years, has a sense of the potential and opportunity for his children. But this opportunity can only come when and as the child learns the dominant majority group culture. The neighborhood school concept, because of the ethnic housing patterns which exist in almost all cities, means that his child is only able to learn and play with others like himself.

These others may not be those he sees on his own block, as noted before, but they come from the same general background. Since there is little neighborhood contact visible in the local school, such a parent sees no particular problem in having his child moved into another area for schooling, if the educational opportunities thus available mean that he will have an enlarged view of the world.

In other words, the local school concept is viable only as it is educationally and socially meaningful. The Catholic parent will send his child across town to go to the best Catholic high school. The parent of a blind child will see his youngster transported many miles for basic education preparatory to eventual integration in regular classrooms. The upward mobile parent buys expensive private day-school education, involving lengthy bus rides, because he feels it is educationally advantageous. Given today's communities, there appear to be few stable elements which require a strict adherence to a neighborhood school concept. In fact, as illustrated from the experience of big cities, a strict interpretation of the local school can serve to interfere with the education of highly mobile families.

In conclusion, then, it must be asserted that educationally there appears to be little rationale for the neighborhood school. In terms of today's highly mobile communities, the concept itself

has little meaning. If local schools attended by those residents in nearby areas are to be established as reasonable, then it must be made clear how and why this idea is educationally useful.